

## אין - Ayin

(Nothingness, No-thingness)

### Background

1) “We say what [the One] is not, but not what it is.... [It is] higher than what we call ‘being.’”<sup>1</sup>

2) God is “the cause of being for all, but is itself nonbeing, for it is beyond all being.”<sup>2</sup>

3) Because of “the ineffable, incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the divine goodness.... it is not improperly called ‘nothing.’”<sup>3</sup>

4) God “exists but not through existence.”<sup>4</sup>

5) “The description of God ... by means of negations is the correct description.... You come nearer to the apprehension of God with every increase in the negations regarding God.”<sup>5</sup>

6) Rabbi Yohanan said, “Words of Torah endure only in a person who makes himself like one who is as nothing, as is said: **והחכמה מאין תמצא** (*Ve-ha-hokhmah me-ayin timmatse*), *Wisdom, where is it found? Wisdom comes into being from ayin, nothing* (Job 28:12).”<sup>6</sup>

### Kabbalah

7) “Ayin (Nothingness) is more existent than all the being of the world. But since it is simple, and every simple thing is complex compared with its simplicity, it is called Ayin.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plotinus (third-century mystical philosopher), *Enneads* 5:3:14.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth-century Christian mystic), *The Divine Names* 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> John Scotus Erigena (ninth-century Christian mystic), *Periphyseon* 634d.

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides (twelfth-century Jewish philosopher), *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:57.

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:58–59.

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 21b.

<sup>7</sup> David ben Avraham ha-Lavan (fourteenth-century Kabbalist), *Masoret ha-Berit*, ed. Gershom Scholem, *Qovets al Yad*, n.s. 1 (1936), 31.

8) “The inner power is called *Ayin* because thought does not grasp it, nor reflection. Concerning this, Job said, **והחכמה מאין תמצא** (*Ve-ha-hokhmah me-ayin timmatse*), *Wisdom, where is it found? Wisdom comes into being from Ayin* (Job 28:12).”<sup>8</sup>

9) “The depth of primordial being ... is called **אין גבול** (*ein gevul*), Boundless. Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is also called *Ayin* (Nothingness).... If one asks, ‘What is it?’, the answer is, ‘*Ayin* (Nothing),’ meaning: ‘No one can understand anything about it.’ It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is **איהיה** (*Ehyeh*), *I am*. (Exodus 3:14).”<sup>9</sup>

10) “[The first *sefirah*] is ... the sum of all existence, and all have wearied in their search for it.... The belt of the wise is burst by this mysterious cause of causes.

“Arouse yourself to contemplate, to focus thought, for God is **אפיסת כל המחשבות** (*afisat kol ha-mahashavot*), the annihilation of all thoughts, uncontainable by any concept. Indeed, since no one can contain God at all, it is called *Ayin* (Nothingness). This is the secret of the verse, **והחכמה מאין תמצא** (*Ve-ha-hokhmah me-ayin timmatse*), *Wisdom comes into being from Ayin*’ (Job 28:12). Anything sealed and concealed, totally unknown to anyone, is called *Ayin*, meaning that no one knows anything about it. Similarly, no one knows anything about the human soul; she stands in the status of nothingness, as is written: *The superiority of the human over the beast is Ayin* (Ecclesiastes 3:19). By means of this soul, the human being... attains the glory of *Ayin*.

“That which abides in thought yet cannot be grasped is called **חכמה** (*Hokhmah*), Wisdom. What is the meaning of **חכמה** (*Hokhmah*)? **חכה מה** (*Hakkeh mah*), ‘Wait for what.’ Since you can never grasp it, **חכה** (*hakkeh*), ‘wait,’ for **מה** (*mah*), ‘what,’ will come and what will be. This is the sublime, primordial wisdom emerging from *Ayin*.”<sup>10</sup>

11) [A true prayer is one in which] “we have directed the words to the nothingness of the word.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Asher ben David (thirteenth-century Kabbalist), cited by Ephraim Gottlieb, *Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1970), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Gikatilla (thirteenth-century Kabbalist), *Sha'arei Orah* (Warsaw 1883), 44a–b; Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Moses de León (thirteenth-century Kabbalist), *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, A. W. Greenup (ed.), (London 1911), 23–24; Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 69–70.

<sup>11</sup> Azriel of Gerona (thirteenth-century Kabbalist), *Sod ha-Tefillah*, in Gershom Scholem (ed.), “*Seridim Hadashim mi-Kitvei R. Azri’el mi-Gerona*,” in S. Assaf and G. Scholem (eds.), *Sefer Zikaron le-Asher Gulak ve-li-Shemu’el Klein* (Jerusalem 1942), 215.

## Hasidism

12) Transform אני (*aniy*), “I,” into אין (*ayin*), “Nothing.”<sup>12</sup>

13) “When one sows a single seed, it cannot sprout and produce many seeds until its existence is nullified. Then it is raised to its root and can receive more than a single dimension of its existence. There in its root the seed itself becomes the source of many seeds.”<sup>13</sup>

14) *Ayin* is the root of all things, and “when one brings anything to its root, one can transform it.” “First [each thing] must arrive at the level of *Ayin*; only then can it become something else.” *Ayin* “strips off one form and puts on another.” “Transformation is possible only through... *Ayin*.”<sup>14</sup>

15) “Think of yourself as *Ayin* and forget yourself totally. Then you can transcend time, rising to the world of thought, where all is equal: life and death, ocean and dry land. Such is not the case if you are attached to the material nature of the world. If you think of yourself as something, then God cannot clothe Himself in you, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless you think of yourself as *Ayin*.”<sup>15</sup>

16) “The essence of serving God and of all the *mitsvot* is to attain the state of humility, namely,... to understand that all your physical and mental powers and your essential being depend on the divine elements within. You are simply a channel for the divine qualities. You attain this humility through the awe of God’s vastness, through realizing that ‘there is no place empty of God.’ Then you come to the state of *Ayin*, the state of humility.... You have no independent self and are contained, as it were, in the Creator.... This is the meaning of the verse: *Moses hid his face, for he was in awe* (Exodus 3:6). Through his experience of awe, Moses attained the hiding of his face, that is, he perceived no independent self. Everything was part of divinity.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 214.

<sup>13</sup> Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya’aqov*, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (ed.), (Jerusalem 1976), 209. See John 12:14: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:36: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” Cf. Koran 6:95: “God is the one who splits the grain of corn and the date-stone. He brings forth the living from the dead.”

<sup>14</sup> Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya’aqov*, 49, 91, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya’aqov*, 186; Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Issachar Ber of Zlotshov, *Mevasser Tsedeq* (Berditchev, 1817), 9a–b; Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 72. See John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2:7: “When one is brought to nothing [*nada*], the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between one’s soul and God will be effected.”

17) When reciting the first line of the *Shema*: *Hear O Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is one* (Deuteronomy 6:4), “you should intend that there is nothing in the world but God.... You should consider yourself to be *אין ואפס* (*ayin ve-efes*), absolute nothingness. Your essence is only the soul within, part of God above. Thus only God is! This is the meaning of the word *one*.”<sup>17</sup>

18) “When you attain the level of ... gazing at *Ayin*, your intellect is annihilated.... Afterwards, when you return to the intellect, it is filled with emanation.”<sup>18</sup>

19) “This is the foundation of the entire Torah: that *Yesh* [the apparent “somethingness” of the world] be annihilated into *Ayin*.... The purpose of the creation of the worlds from *Ayin* to *Yesh* (something) was that they be transformed from *Yesh* to *Ayin*.”<sup>19</sup>

20) “In everything they do, even physical acts such as eating, the righteous raise the holy sparks, from food or any other object. They thus transform *Yesh* into *Ayin*.”<sup>20</sup>

21) “When you gaze at an object, you bring blessing to it. For through contemplation, you know that it is really absolutely nothing without divinity permeating it. By means of this awareness, you draw greater vitality to that object from the divine source of life, since you bind that thing to absolute *Ayin*, the origin of all.... On the other hand, if you look at that object as a separate thing, by your look, that thing is cut off from its divine root and vitality.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Liqqutei Yeqarim* (Lemberg, 1865), 12b.

<sup>18</sup> Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, *Qedushat Levi* (Jerusalem 1972), 71d.

<sup>19</sup> Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Torah Or* (Vilna, 1899), *Noah* 11a; *Va-Yetse* 22b.

<sup>20</sup> Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Dov Baer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov*, 124-25.